

# The work experiences of an assistant head of school

*Joanne Ghirxi*

*Assistant Heads Of School  
Primary Schools  
Challenges  
Professional Development  
Leadership*

## **1. Introduction**

“Scratch the surface of an excellent school and you are likely to find an excellent principal. Peer into a failing school and you are likely to find weak leadership”

(Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2). It is widely believed that heads of school are the key to a successful school (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2013; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). However, as Fullan (2002) remarked, the top leader alone cannot succeed in such an important mission.



The roles and responsibilities of the head of school have become more complex, challenging, and demanding (Billot, Goddard & Cranston, 2007; Cranston, 2007; Gronn, 2003). This pressure on the head demands a strong and effective leadership team which shares responsibility amongst its members. It therefore entails that each of these members brings individual strengths to the team. Furthermore, it necessitates that assistant heads are comprehended fully and engaged wisely for the sum of the individual parts of the leadership team to be greater than the whole.

In Malta, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), also referred to as the Senior Management Team (SMT), includes the head and the assistant heads. The SLT's overriding

objective is to ensure the strategic planning and successful educational development of the school's pupils. It is essential for the SLT to be effective "to ensure that the operational and strategic leadership of their school is secure" (Thomas, 2009, p. 4). Several researchers have sought to gain a greater insight into the effectiveness and dynamics of the SLT (Cranston & Ehrich, 2005; Ehrich & Cranston, 2004; Hall & Wallace, 1996; Wallace 2002). Getting to know each constituent is an effective way of strengthening the team. Substantial research has been dedicated to heads of school; by contrast, the role of assistant heads of school has been frequently ignored in educational literature (Harris, Muijs & Crawford, 2003; Cranston, Tromans & Reugebrink, 2004; Lee, Kwan & Walker, 2009; Oleszewski, Shoho & Barnett, 2012).

This research aims to contribute towards narrowing this literature gap.

Moreover, the constant flow of reforms being introduced and implemented within the Maltese education system, and internationally, means that heads of school have increasing and broader responsibilities. These leaders require the full cooperation of high-performing assistant heads with whom to share the leadership of the school. Additionally, when the time comes for heads of school to retire or progress to another field, they leave behind a critical, vacant position that needs to be filled by equally qualified leaders.



# Short Research Reports by Public Service Officers

## 2. Aim of Research

This research aims to analyse and evaluate the work experiences of assistant heads in primary schools to provide a better understanding of this profession.

This research seeks to answer the following five questions:

1. What does an assistant head feel during her/his experience as an assistant head and what determines those feelings?
2. Is an assistant head satisfied with the various duties assigned and why?
3. What challenges does an assistant head face in the current role?
4. What mentoring/training does an assistant head receive?
5. What factors would help an assistant head to become an excellent leader?

## 3. Research Methods

The research adopted a qualitative approach and “examines the way people make sense of their own concrete real-self experiences in their own minds and in their own words” (Cropley, 2019, p. 5). Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with six assistant heads from six different state primary schools in Gozo. In order to recruit a homogeneous sample, purposive sampling was adopted so as to ensure that the participants were immersed in the role of assistant heads and had at least two years’ experience in the post.

An interview guide was designed for the one-to-one interviews, based on the research questions. Each interview lasted less than one hour. The interviews were conducted over a thirty-day period between June-July 2019. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The audio of each interview was transcribed, with the transcript of the interview being offered to the participants to ensure that the transcript was a faithful representation of the interview.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, which is “the process of identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). In this research, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework was used.

## 4. Main Findings

### 4.1 Emotional Responses related to the Work Experience

During their working day, assistant heads feel a variety of emotions. Feelings such as job satisfaction, being appreciated, and being motivated indicate a productive atmosphere in schools. However, assistant heads experience moments of stress and being overloaded at work, with consequent feelings of frustration, tiredness, and sadness. Moreover, assistant heads experience loneliness. This loneliness is rooted in the assistant head's position.

### 4.2 Responsibilities and Duties

Assistant heads have a wide and deep spectrum of responsibilities and duties. The duties are related to pedagogy and curriculum, day-to-day matters, and administrative and clerical tasks. The interviews confirm that assistant heads spend extensive time and energy on clerical and managerial duties rather than focusing on instructional leadership tasks. However, assistant heads stated that they would prefer to engage more in leadership duties.

Two major factors contributing to this situation are the lack of clarity in the job description and the lack of human resources to support the administrative and clerical work in schools.

### 4.3 Challenges

Assistant heads encounter several challenges at work. Such challenges include the time pressure due to the high demand of duties and responsibilities assigned, dealing with frustration, lack of empowerment by the head, lack of support by the teachers, and lack of job mobility and opportunities in Gozo.

### 4.4 The Professional Growth of an Assistant Head of School

This research exposes the lack of formal mentoring, coaching, and training courses that assistant heads receive during their career in assistant headship. The short induction training provided to newly appointed assistant heads was described as ineffective. Assistant heads are expected to learn informally on the job. Moreover, the majority of interviewed assistant heads did not have the support of a mentor. Mentorship from the head, if any, happened in an informal and unstructured way.



### 4.5 Aspirations to Headship

The majority of interviewed assistant heads do not aspire for headship. They perceived that the role of the head of school is too demanding, with a lot of pressure and responsibilities, and that it too lacks the recognition and support required from superiors.

### Further Findings

#### 4.6 Transition from Teacher to Assistant Head of School

Some assistant heads were inspired to take up their role because they believed that they could contribute better to the outcomes of the school. Others were encouraged by role model heads that they encountered during their experience as teachers. The transition from teacher to assistant head is demanding and challenging. The findings clearly indicate that exposing teachers to certain duties of extended responsibility before becoming an assistant head facilitates the transition.

#### 4.7 The Relationship between the Assistant Head and the Head of School

The assistant heads emphasised the importance of a professional relationship between the head and the assistant heads. Such a relationship should be built on mutual trust, honesty, respect, and cemented with effective communication and dialogue. Assistant heads highlighted the importance of being involved in the decision-making process and for their opinions to be valued and respected. Moreover, assistant heads also emphasised that the head and the assistant head should work hand in hand and share the same goals and objectives. This was also observed by Share and Walshaw (2018).

## 5. Recommendations

The role of assistant head of school needs to be strengthened, as otherwise it would be a weak point in the SLT. This can be done in several ways.

### 5.1 Understanding the Role of Assistant Head of School

The research has shown that during their work, assistant heads feel stressed, overloaded, frustrated, and lonely. Heads of school need to take a proactive approach to ensure that the assistant heads feel supported emotionally and professionally.

The head of school should also be considerate of the type and number of duties that they assign to the assistant heads, since ultimately it is the head that delegates such duties.

Furthermore, there should be a professional setup where assistant heads can meet to share good practices, concerns, thoughts, ideas, and suggestions. This would provide the opportunity to assistant heads to engage with peers, thus reducing the feeling of isolation and loneliness at work. Moreover, the availability of a support service would help assistant heads to be more in control of difficult situations at work. They would be able to learn how to cope better with their emotions.

### 5.2 Supporting the Role of Assistant Head of School

The job description of assistant head of school should be made clear and specific to include more leadership duties. There should be a clear distinction between routine clerical/managerial work and leadership/educational duties.



Qualified administrative personnel can be engaged to perform clerical and managerial work, thus relieving the assistant heads from such tasks. This would enable assistant heads to focus and dedicate more of their time to the curriculum, teaching, and learning.

### 5.3 Strengthening the Role of the Assistant Head of School

Policy-makers within the Department of Education need to be far more familiar with the school context and the realities faced by assistant heads. The Department of Education can use data similar to this study or invest in further research to assess and evaluate the current situation of assistant heads, this in order to envisage new ways of improving the situation holistically and not in isolation.

Moreover, investment should be channelled towards training and development programmes designed for the professional development of teachers aspiring to become assistant heads. This would equip them with the skills and knowledge required for assistant headship.

Mentoring for newly appointed assistant heads is of utmost importance. Coaching should continue beyond the induction phase. Furthermore, assistant heads should be provided with opportunities for learning throughout their career. Such courses should be ongoing and part of a long-term professional development strategy.



Assistant heads should be given rotational leadership roles within the same school to increase their exposure. They should also be provided with opportunities to change school and to work within different SLTs so that they can experience different styles of leadership, engage in other responsibilities, and face new challenges. This exposure would be useful for the personal and professional development of assistant heads.

The composition of the SLT should be based on the synergy that is required between its individual members to function as a whole for the optimum benefit of the school. This would result in a highly professional and dynamic SLT. The composition of the SLT should be reviewed periodically to assess its effectiveness and monitor opportunities for improvement.

In this research, the majority of assistant heads did not aspire for headship as the head's role is seen as unattractive. The education authorities should research the root cause of this negative perception and identify ways how to redefine the role of the head into a rewarding one that attracts the best educators.

## 6. Conclusion

### This research is the first study on assistant heads of state primary schools in Gozo.

It indicates that the position of assistant headship is not utilised to its full potential and does not get the merit that it deserves. This does not only relate to the local educational system. In fact, various international studies have highlighted similar observations (Glanz, 1994; Ribbins, 1997; Kaplan & Owings, 1999; Marshall & Hooley, 2006).

Moreover, assistant heads are an essential asset and critical leaders in schools—they are next in line to heads of school. The research shows that the profession of assistant head of school needs to be redefined to be more focused on educational and leadership responsibilities and less on clerical and managerial duties. It is also essential to identify ways how to improve the skills and knowledge of assistant heads to help them address challenges, overcome barriers, and to be successful in their role.

Assistant heads need to be provided with continuous programmes of professional development which go beyond their initial days as new administrators. The aim is to have knowledgeable assistant heads who contribute to the effective leadership of the school and the successful academic performance and self-development of students. Eventually, they will have the potential to become outstanding heads of school.



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